

# OBJECTIVES—ARE THEY USEFUL?

## A QUICK ASSESSMENT

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Most people understand the importance of objectives and the link between having objectives and accomplishing results. However, there is a difference between a well-defined objective and a poorly developed objective both in how they are constructed and in what they ultimately lead to. In this article, we explore three levels of objectives, provide examples of good objectives at each level, and put forth a 7-point inspection any objective should meet if it is to be a useful objective.

THE ACTIONS AN ORGANIZATION and its individual members take have an impact outside its borders, in the results that it delivers to clients, and their impact, in turn, on society—that larger “Mega” world—into which the organization delivers its contributions and derives its usefulness. Objectives offer the organization the opportunity to *plan* those effects, purposefully linking them to valuable strategic, tactical, and operational purposes rather than assuming that links exist to serve those purposes well.

The link between objectives and value added is fairly well understood if not well formally operationalized: It is crucial to realize that just “having an objective” is not enough. Different varieties of objectives can yield very different types of results—and the *quality* of an organization’s objectives is reflected in everything it does—in the Outputs it delivers to external clients, the impact these have for our shared world (Outcomes), and the performance (Products) of individuals and teams expected to deliver the results that can and should add measurable value to all clients, both internal and external.

When distinguishing between quality objectives that will actually get us where we want to go and poor objectives that will result in organizational chaos and undesirable results, we have to look at three levels of organizational consequences, alignment between these levels, and then how to construct an objective that clearly defines the desirable consequences at these levels.

### THREE LEVELS OF WEEDS AND FRUIT (AKA, CONSEQUENCES)

Ancient wisdom admonishes us that we reap what we sow; objectives are the antecedents of the actions undertaken in pursuit of them, from the entry-level individual employee to the organization as a whole. According to Oakley-Browne (personal communication, October, 2007), “the value of objectives is linked to consequences. Antecedents are like triggers or activators for performance” (p. 5). Specifically, there are three levels of consequences for both well- and poorly developed objectives—Mega, Macro, and Micro—and the corresponding objectives must be both well-articulated *and aligned* across all three. (See Table 1.) The quality of Micro-level objectives, for instance, will show up in the performance of individuals and small groups within an organization and in the quality, defined as fitness for use, of the Products an organization delivers.

Let us look at some examples of good objectives at the Mega, Macro, and Micro levels and then examine how to align and why alignment is so important. We’ve provided examples across settings to demonstrate how these sorts of objectives can be developed in any environment.

Every organization has external clients, participates in society, and must demonstrate added value to that society if it is to attract customers rather than condemnation (or funding rather than sanctions). In effect, if an organization is to continue to be viable, planning at the Outcomes,

TABLE 1 THE ORGANIZATIONAL ELEMENTS, RELATED RESULTS, AND DEFINITIONS		
ORGANIZATIONAL ELEMENT	LEVEL OF PLANNING AND FOCUS	BRIEF DESCRIPTION
Outcomes	Mega	Results and their consequences for external clients and society
Outputs	Macro	The results an organization can or does deliver outside of itself
Products	Micro	The building-block results that are produced within the organization
Processes	Process	The ways, means, activities, procedures, and methods used internally
Inputs	Input	The human, physical, and financial resources an organization can or does use

Source. Kaufman, 2000, 2006a.

or Mega, level constitutes the most critical focus for planning organizational success. It is this level, not the Macro level, that is most properly understood as strategic planning: poor or absent objectives here can ultimately kill the organization.

Among the new expectations for organizations is a growing demand from their customers or constituents for them to be socially responsive and responsible. Mega-level objectives represent the planner's tools for achieving these expectations. For example, a Mega-level objective could be stated (a military example) as follows:

By the conclusion of Ramadan, noncombatant civilians residing in the Province will suffer no greater rates of violent death or injury than those seen from baseline crime rates in surrounding countries deemed by the United Nations to be "at peace." All coalition force operations will be conducted in accordance with U.S. and international law, as indicated by no upheld successful prosecutions of coalition personnel in military or international courts for offenses causing loss of life, limb, and/or livelihood. There will be no loss of non-combatant civilian life attributed to coalition force operations as certified by Provincial government or United Nations monitors.

Examples of Mega-level Outcomes to be measured include such contributing indicators as health and well-being consequences of pollution, accidents, discrimination, poverty, substance abuse, disease, shelter, war or riot, harm to environment, starvation (or malnutrition), child abuse, partner/spousal abuse, and self-sufficiency. Every

organization contributes to the increase or decrease of one or more of these Outcomes—and Mega-level objectives articulate precisely what to choose for that contribution.

The quality of the second level of objectives, Macro objectives, will appear in the Outputs of an organization. Outputs are the things an organization can or does deliver outside itself (e.g., manufactured automobiles, educated graduates, defeated adversaries)—not to be confused with the actual effects created by delivery of those things. A well-defined Output is a crisp definition of what an organization puts out into the surrounding marketplace or environment. For example, an output can be "provide timely aid to victims of natural disaster" (poorly defined) . . . or alternatively (a government example):

After October of this year, at least 99% of all families rendered homeless by any natural disaster will receive adequate emergency shelter within 48 hours after the disaster event ends, where inadequacy is indicated by number of substantiated complaints (including health and nutrition-related consequences) that shelter did not protect occupants from the elements and was unsafe when provided.

Traditional planning usually originates at Macro-level—often mislabeled "strategic" planning. While this is a critical part of the process, effective planning must begin at the Mega level.

Finally, we come to Micro-level objectives. These cascade from well-developed Mega and Macro objectives. A well-developed objective at the Micro level might state the following (a corporate example):

*Different varieties of objectives can yield very different types of results—and the quality of an organization's objectives is reflected in everything it does.*

Cellular telephones and bundled accessories delivered to final assembly and shipping will meet all quality acceptance standards and criteria, as indicated by sign-off of the quality inspector on each shift and no greater than 0.2% rejects from the quality assurance test laboratory.

Such a clearly defined objective at the Micro level articulates precisely what the target is and how to know when it has been achieved. It does not presuppose the means, methods, approaches, and activities to achieve the objective; instead, it clearly focuses on ends and not means. However, an objective at this level does not specify what the evidence should be that the organization as a whole is meeting its purposes (Macro level) or adding value for its external clients and society (Mega level).

Depending on how well defined an organization's objectives are at the Mega, Macro, and Micro levels, the activities of an organization and the individuals within will yield either weeds or fruit. This is true no matter what the context, be it in the public or private sector, profit-driven or not-for-profit. Gearing an organization's tasks, Products, Outputs, and Outcomes towards useful, productive "fruit" requires close attention to the alignment of objectives across levels, and to how quality objectives are constructed in the first place.

## ALIGNMENT ACROSS LEVELS

When the focus is on crafting quality objectives for the particular organization or organizational element, it is easy to assume that success in this effort (and subsequent attainment of those objectives) will automatically bear fruit for the organization (or society) of which you are a part. After all, if company X has seven divisions, and all

seven have well-defined objectives, all of which they are attaining, then company X *must* be doing well, right?

The reasons why this is *not* necessarily the case can be thought of in terms of alignment and value added to internal and external clients. If each division is meeting its objectives, that does not mean that the whole—the sum of all results—will deliver useful and required results unless those objectives are aligned to the total value required by external clients. Each objective at the Micro level must add value up the value chain. Alignment helps ensure that they are adding value—and growing fruit and not just more weeds.

The importance of this is exceptionally clear in military contexts, though it applies just as well to any other setting. It has often been said of the conflict in Vietnam that the United States won every battle (achieved all its Micro-level objectives) but lost the war (these "victories" did not add up to support its Macro-level objective). Even more critically, this success at the Micro level added no lasting value to Vietnamese society (Mega-level objectives), at least in the short term. Today, while military planners expressly consider all three levels of objectives and their alignment, much of the slow progress being observed in Iraq and Afghanistan can be attributed to breakdowns in these processes as much as to the actions of adversaries who *exploit* such breakdowns.

We have seen similar effects in business when levels of objectives are not aligned. Many *dot-com* failures resulted from organizations that performed well at the Micro level but had no clear link between those accomplishments and coherent Macro-level objectives. Disconnects between Mega-level objectives (or absence of such objectives altogether) and objectives at Macro or Micro levels are even more common—and ultimately more disastrous. Historically, entire industries have operated for decades (if not centuries) with well-aligned Micro- and Macro-level objectives producing growth and strong profits, and all the while *subtracting* value from society with their processes (e.g., through unconstrained pollution, or earlier exploitative labor practices) or even their products themselves (e.g., tobacco), resulting in decades of billion-dollar costs for toxic waste cleanup, public health consequences, and other expenses directly linked to their operations.

It should be clear at this point that alignment is a necessary, even *a priori*, "external" criterion (i.e., how this objective relates to the world outside itself) for a well-defined objective. Before we begin to write (for example) a Macro-level objective, we must first ask ourselves, how is accomplishment of this objective going to be *necessary* to contribute to one or more of our Mega-level objectives? And second, what set of Micro-level objectives will this objective imply? (That is, what is necessary at the

Micro level that, if accomplished, will be sufficient for accomplishment of this Macro-level objective?) Attention to these two questions as we write will ensure proper alignment of our objectives across levels. So now that we've covered the levels of objectives and why alignment is critical, let's examine how to ensure quality objectives at each level.

## ANATOMY OF THE WELL-DEVELOPED OBJECTIVE: THE 7-POINT CHECK

So, how do we avoid or remove the weeds of poorly conceived and badly defined objectives? Start with conscious attention to the development of useful objectives at the Mega, Macro, and Micro levels within your organization. The best time to do this is early on; be sure to plant seeds that bear fruit, not weeds. Start with well-defined objectives to eliminate rooting out the effects of poorly defined ones.

Objectives that bear fruit have the following characteristics. Use this check to rid your organization of poor objectives and fill it with quality objectives. Any objective that does not pass the 7-point check (based on Kaufman, 2000, 2006a) should be viewed as a car that fails critical points of a safety inspection. Every objective should obtain this 7-point rating:

1. The objective states only ends and never includes means, methods, activities, or how-to-do-its. Ends are

results, achievements, consequences, payoffs, or impacts.

2. The objective is measurable on an interval or ratio scale.
3. The objective includes four components that aid measurement:
  - a. What result is to be accomplished?
  - b. Who or what will demonstrate the accomplished result?
  - c. Under what conditions will the result be observed and measured?
  - d. What the measurable result will be, in Interval or Ratio scale terms (Kaufman, 2000, 2006a; Kaufman, Guerra, & Platt, 2006)?
4. The objective does not start with or include words ending in "ing." Words ending in "ing" are usually a means (e.g., "training," "providing," "producing") and thus should not appear in any useful objective.
5. Useful objectives are based on meeting documented needs—gaps between current results and required results (Kaufman, 1987, 1994, 2006a, 2006b; Kaufman & English, 1979; Kaufman, Rojas, & Mayer, 1993; Kaufman & Watkins, 1999; Oakley-Browne, 2007; Stevens, 1951; Triner, Greenberry, & Watkins, 1996; Watkins, Leigh, Platt, & Kaufman, 1998; Witkin, 1994). Useful objectives are grounded in data rather than perceived wants.

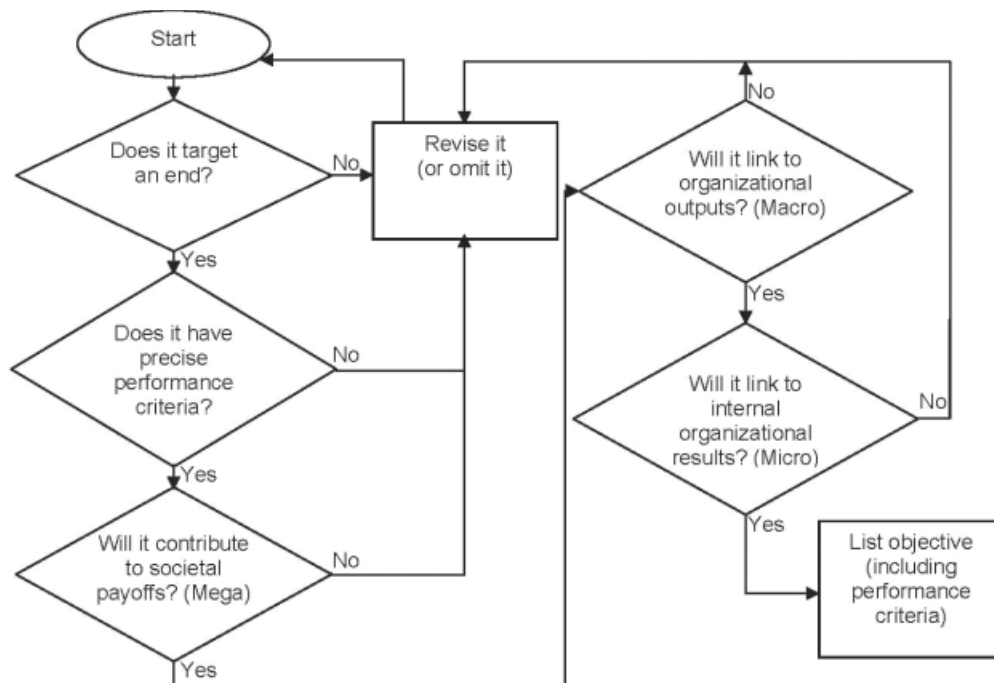


FIGURE 1. ASSURING OBJECTIVE LINKS TO ALL THREE LEVELS OF RESULTS

6. Each objective should state only one result to be accomplished.
7. Each objective is linked to results and consequences for individuals and small groups and objectives for the organization, external clients, and society.

## A Job Aid for the 7-Point Check

Any candidate “objective” that does not include these seven characteristics is actually a weed. Table 2 provides a quick assessment of any objective based on these seven vital characteristics. Apply this tool to each of the organization’s Mega-, Macro-, and Micro-level objectives to determine if it receives a 7-point rating, and weed out those that do not (inspired by Gander, 2006). We are building on her “learning objectives challenge” and not the balance of her suggestions.

Add up the columns. Point gains and losses are like the gains and losses objectives accrued for your organization.

Good objectives can lead it to the fruit of desired results, while poorly formed objectives are weeds that can cost it time, money, and relevancy.

## The 7 Points: Why Care?

**Items 1 and 4.** Well-defined objectives are a vital precondition for *selecting* the best ways and means to meet them (and thus for closing gaps between current and desired results). If ways and means are embedded in the objective itself, you are essentially selecting them *and identifying the criteria for doing so* at the same time; this has two major drawbacks. First, it anoints one possible solution with the same authority as the objective itself; second, it selects this solution before anyone—either the objective writer or other stakeholders—has had time to reflect on the objective it is supposed to meet.

“Ing” words are one very common symptom of this particular species of weed. For example, “training employees on X” is not an objective—it is a means for

**TABLE 2 THE 7-POINT CHECK: ARE YOUR OBJECTIVES USEFUL**

CHARACTERISTIC	YES	NO
1. Does the objective only state ends, and not include any means, methods, activities, or resources?	1 point	0 points
2. Does the objective state a purpose in measurable performance terms?	1 point	0 points
3. Does the objective have all 4 components: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What result is to be accomplished</li> <li>• Who or what will demonstrate the accomplished result</li> <li>• Under what conditions will the result be observed and measured</li> <li>• What the measurable result will be, on an Interval or Ratio scale?</li> </ul>	1 point	0 points
4. Is the objective free of “ing” words that are actually means?	1 point	0 points
5. Is the objective based on documented needs, that is, gaps in results?	1 point	0 points
6. Is only one result stated?	1 point	0 points
7. Is the objective linked to (aligned with) results and consequences for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals and small groups (Micro)</li> <li>• The organization (Macro)</li> <li>• External clients and society (Mega)?</li> </ul>	1 point	0 points
TOTAL	7	0



accomplishing an end. Any objective that starts with an “ing” word that is really a preselected means will be afflicted by the drawbacks noted above.

Effective leaders plan results before selecting the means to achieve them (Oakley-Browne, personal communication, October 2007). In part, this is because the optimal means can sometimes change as events unfold and new information is encountered. By ensuring that the objectives do *not* include means, you maintain a “results orientation” that preserves your organization’s flexibility to adapt should this occur—potentially offering a critical competitive advantage.

**Items 2, 3, and 6.** Objectives state where you want to go and how to know when you have arrived. As Mager (1997) points out, “There is no way to decide what action to take until we know what we are trying to accomplish” (1997, p. 1). Knowledge of where you’re headed includes the start point, the end point, the aim line, and (as just noted) the ability to check and adjust course as you go.

**Item 5.** Objectives are based on solid performance evidence and rooted in needs—gaps between current results and desired results. Needs identified from a formal needs assessment will bear fruit through valid and useful objectives. Objectives that are not based upon such an assessment are likely weeds that can grow to obscure the view of your destination and lead you “someplace else.”

**Item 7.** Finally, the attainment of *any* objective is useful only if you are certain that *all* objectives are related to a common purpose. Useful objectives are valuable only insofar as they align individual results and contributions to organizational results and contributions, and from there to external results and contributions (Micro-, Macro-, and Mega-level results) and have additive value.

Many planners make the strategic mistake of overlooking or even assuming positive societal impact. Objectives that contribute to societal-level impact are ultimately what ensure an organization’s sustainability. If an organization acts ethically, that is, adds value to society beyond just the short term, then it harvests the fruits of customer loyalty and stays in business over the long term. Organizations that lose sight of this, from corrupt or harmful businesses to “kleptocratic” governments, are eventually uprooted by customers or societies grown weary of their thorns and thistles.

## SOME PARTING THOUGHTS

Well-defined objectives offer an organization the chance to try to plan and shape its impact on its customers, its employees, and the world around it. Because you can’t avoid *having* an impact, it stands to reason that this chance is not to be passed up lightly.

To this end, we offer the preceding tools to help you write objectives that are “externally” aligned across levels to reinforce one another, “internally” defined according to the 7-point check, and effective at helping your organization’s efforts bear their desired fruit. Attending to these matters from the beginning can save your organization a lot of *wasted* effort “pulling the weeds” of bad objectives, and help you focus its activities and resources on the outcomes—external value added—you want to achieve. 🌱

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